


The Living Museum of my Generation's Failure: On The Living Museum of Small, Forgotten and Unwanted Memories by Joana Craveiro/ Teatro do Vestido

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Rui Pina Coelho*

No doubt the phrase “documentary theatre” fails us. It is inadequate. Yet at present it is the best phrase available.

Carol Martin (13)

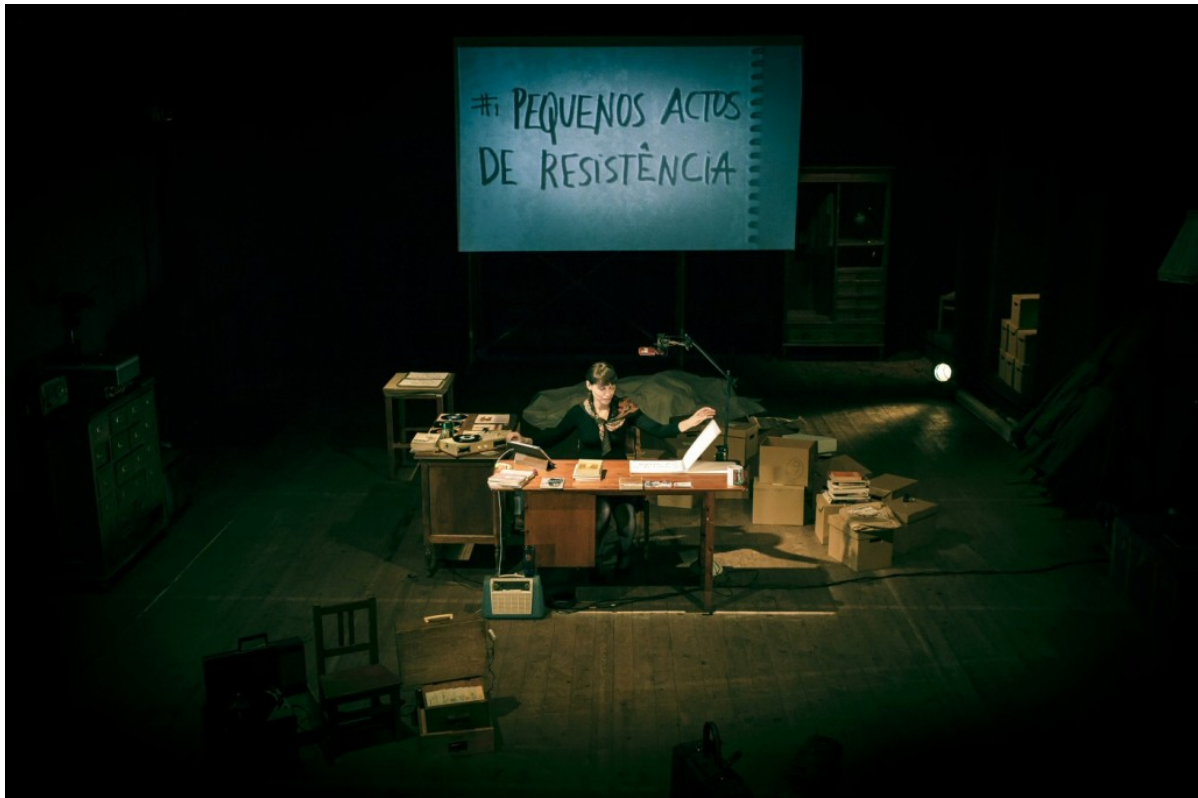
Watching the best theatre and performance we are together and alone.

Tim Etchells (qtd. in Freshwater 7)

1. Documenting forgotten history

Alain Badiou has famously declared the “passion for the real” as the twentieth-century’s “major subjective trait” (40), in contrast with the nineteenth-century utopian or scientific projects and ideals. The twenty-first century succumbed helplessly to the eruption of the real. The real erupted particularly after the series of terrorist attacks globally known as 9/11, in 2001, that ultimately led to the beginning of the military intervention in Iraq ran by a coalition of forces from different countries, in 2003. Then, it was no longer possible for art to remain in its own corsets. The real broke through in a terrible, violent and abject way. All over—but particularly in the Anglophone world—there was a proliferation of performances about terrorist actions or war events, often using “real life performers” such as soldiers or victims of attacks. Life memories, depictions of real actions and first person narrations were often combined with fiction and artistic invention. Themes such as the abuses at Abu Gharib and Guantánamo, terrorist bombings, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq erupted on western stages. For a critic such as Hans-Thies Lehmann, the frisson that some of these performances created has something to do with what he describes as an “aesthetics of undecidability,” considering that the main point of the “theatre of the real” is “the unsettling that occurs through the *undecidability* whether one is dealing with reality or fiction. The theatrical effect and the effect on consciousness both emanate from this ambiguity” (101). This means, basically, that one cannot decide if the response should be aesthetic—thus responding to the “events on stage as fiction” (104)—or moral—thus responding to the events on stage as “reality.”





The Living Museum of Small, Forgotten and Unwanted Memories, by Joana Craveiro / Teatro do Vestido. Photo: João Tuna.

Amongst the many theatrical sensibilities that have worked on this landscape we could find artistic works that deal with the portrayal of violence, self-mutilation performances, the re-enactment of real-life events (most of them could easily fall under what Paul Ardenne (2006) has described as “*esthétique de la limite dépassée*”/aesthetics of the exceeded limit)—but also, most significantly, documentary theatre.

In a famous essay from 1971—“Notes on Contemporary Theatre”—, Peter Weiss, considering documentary theatre as the one “that exclusively deals with the documentation of a particular subject matter,” sketched fourteen arguments for this kind of theatre that are still effective nowadays. Weiss and his contemporaries (such as Heinrich Kipphardt) were responding to the brutal changes in the western ontological paradigm after the horrors of Second World War, considering that they could not really understand a world that was beyond understanding. Thus, the only possible task that was left for them was to present documents and reality the best way they could: “Documentary theatre argues for the alternative view, according to which reality, however impenetrable it tries to be, can be explained in all its detail” (Weiss 386).

More recently, Carol Martin has been analysing and debating contemporary documentary theatre performances. She finds it useful to:

understand [documentary theatre] as [the one] created from a specific body of archived material: interviews, documents, hearings, records, video, film, photographs, etc. Most contemporary documentary theatre make the claim that everything presented is part of the documentary. But equally important is the fact that not everything in the archive is part of the documentary. (9)

This definition stresses the intrinsically political nature of documentary theatre and its dialectical relationship with reality. In a brilliant effort of synthesis, Carol Martin presents six functions for contemporary documentary theatre: 1) “To reopen trials in order to critique justice”; 2) “To create additional historical accounts”; 3) “To reconstruct an event”; 4) “To intermingle autobiography with history”; 5) “To critique the operations of both documentary and fiction”; 6) “To elaborate the oral culture of theatre in which gestures, mannerisms, and attitudes are passed and replicated via technology” (12-13).

This introduction aims to introduce and contextualize the Portuguese theatre performance *The Living Museum of Small, Forgotten and Unwanted Memories – on dictatorship, revolution, and the revolutionary process* [Um museu vivo de memórias pequenas e esquecidas – sobre a ditadura, a revolução e o processo revolucionário] created and interpreted by Portuguese theatre artist, Joana Craveiro (Teatro do Vestido). This performance was the sensation of the last theatrical season in Portugal and it is an extraordinary example of contemporary documentary theatre. In addition, it affected powerfully the way I deal with a theatre performance.



The Living Museum of Small, Forgotten and Unwanted Memories, by Joana Craveiro / Teatro do Vestido. Photo: João Tuna.

2. A Living Museum

Craveiro's theatrical work departs usually from autobiographic, personal and subjective materials. Family memories and innocent *memorabilia* such as letters, postcards, books, journal entries, music records, pictures or newspapers are often present in her performances. This one is no exception. But this lecture-performance has the singularity of merging the intimate and the public, the subjective and the factual, and the poetic and the journalistic. She intermingles her family history with the most relevant public events that occurred in Portugal during the fascist dictatorship (1926 to 1974) until present days. The

performance focuses particularly on the final years of Salazar's regime (the dictator died in 1970) and on the Carnation Revolution of 1974 and its aftermath, in order to re-examine the Portuguese twentieth-century. But the dramaturgical main line is her family's experience of the historical events.

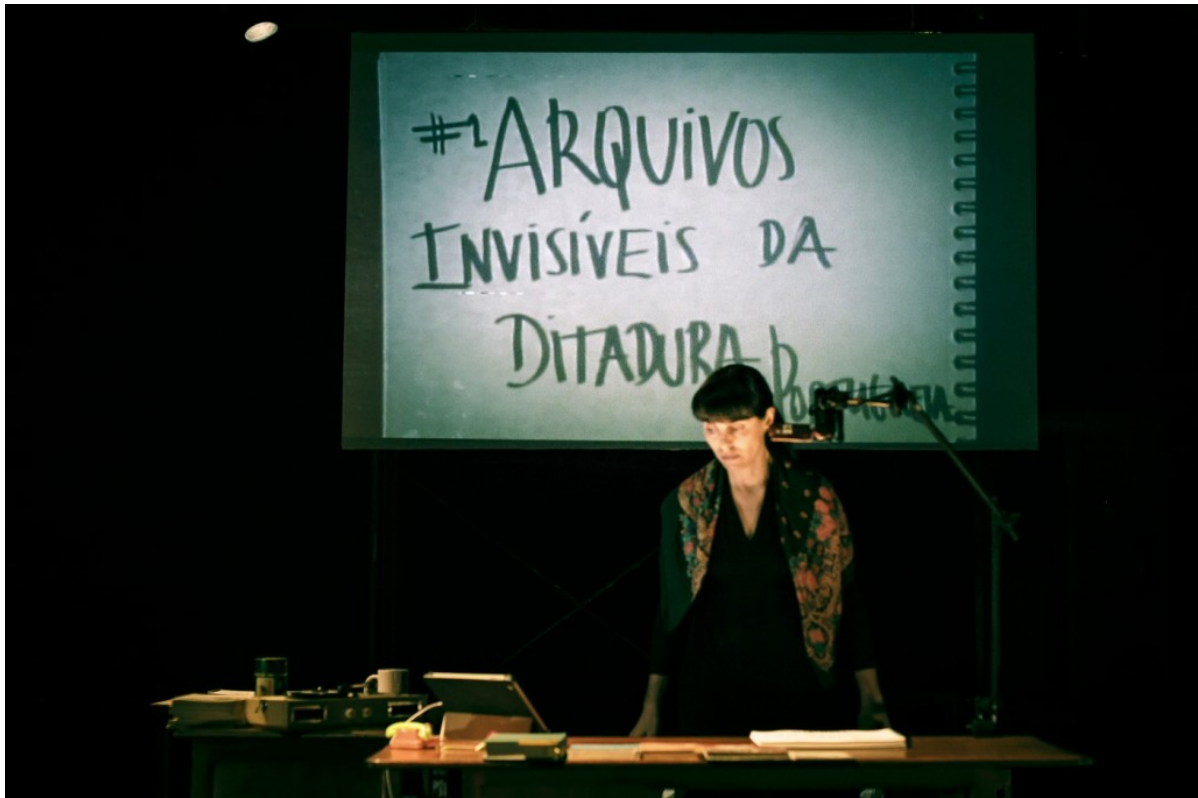
This project, as the artist states in the programme bill:

departs from an investigation about memories, narratives, constructions and images of the last eighty-eight years in Portuguese history, starting with the military dictatorship (1926) that lead to the "Estado Novo"/New State (1933), until the celebrations of the 40th anniversary of the [revolution of] 25th April 1974. (my translation)

Craveiro's work debates the conflicting versions of some fracturing subjects and, more pungently, makes a chimerical attempt to fight the loss of historical memory that afflicts most of us, and, more frighteningly, the discourses of Portuguese public institutions regarding the fascist dictatorship, the revolution and the revolutionary process that animated Portugal in the succeeding years.

The Living Museum of Small, Forgotten and Unwanted Memories is a five hour lecture-performance, composed by a prologue and seven different lectures (presented separately throughout 2014—its final and complete version premiered in November 2014, in Negócio/ZDB, in Lisbon). During most of the time, Craveiro is sitting at a conference table, holding or pointing cameras at books, writings on a notebook, showing transparencies, quoting newspapers, playing records, or walking across the stage manipulating small objects, such as a radio, boxes, a miniature van, *etc.*

The Prologue is set before an old photograph portraying the Swiss Alps that was supposedly displayed in Craveiro's primary school. Craveiro holds a suitcase, similar to the suitcases that thousands of Portuguese emigrants have used throughout the decades—in the sixties and seventies trying to escape fascism and colonial wars; nowadays trying to dodge the economic crisis. The Swiss Alps appear in this anti-fairy tale short story as a dysphoric symbol of a it-was-supposed-to-be-a-promised-land-but-after-all-it-is-just-a-boring land.



The Living Museum of Small, Forgotten and Unwanted Memories, by Joana Craveiro / Teatro do Vestido. Photo: João Tuna.

Although there are many references to historical documents throughout the performance, and notwithstanding the fact that the Prologue creates an atmosphere of veracity and a confessional dimension, several narrated actions are purely fictional and invented, thus contributing decisively to Lehmann's "aesthetics of undecidability."

After the amusing prologue, the audience is invited to sit down. The first lecture ("Small acts of resistance") deals with discrete (almost invisible) actions of resistance during the fascist regime: reading and selling forbidden books, watching films, attending meetings—a myriad of small scale acts of resistance (echoing Peter Weiss's "monument to radical instants" in *The Aesthetics of Resistance* (1975). In fact, Portuguese history and Craveiro's family story are linked through books—particularly those clandestinely sold at a bookstore that her mother used to visit. It is this juxtaposition of stories that makes the performance a powerful and engaging experience; indeed, in my opinion, it is the most relevant Portuguese performance of the last twenty years.

The second lecture ("Invisible Archives of Portuguese Dictatorship") focuses on some examples of the fascist regime's repressive techniques, dealing directly with the memory of the assassination of the law student Ribeiro Santos and the many documented cases of violence and torture perpetrated by the Political Police (PIDE). But, more than a recollection of examples (most of which are public knowledge), Craveiro interrogates the memory of those events in the contemporary public sphere and in Lisbon's urban geography and iconography, to alert us to a dangerous collective amnesia. A striking example of this is the case of the former PIDE headquarters, which is presently a luxurious private condominium.

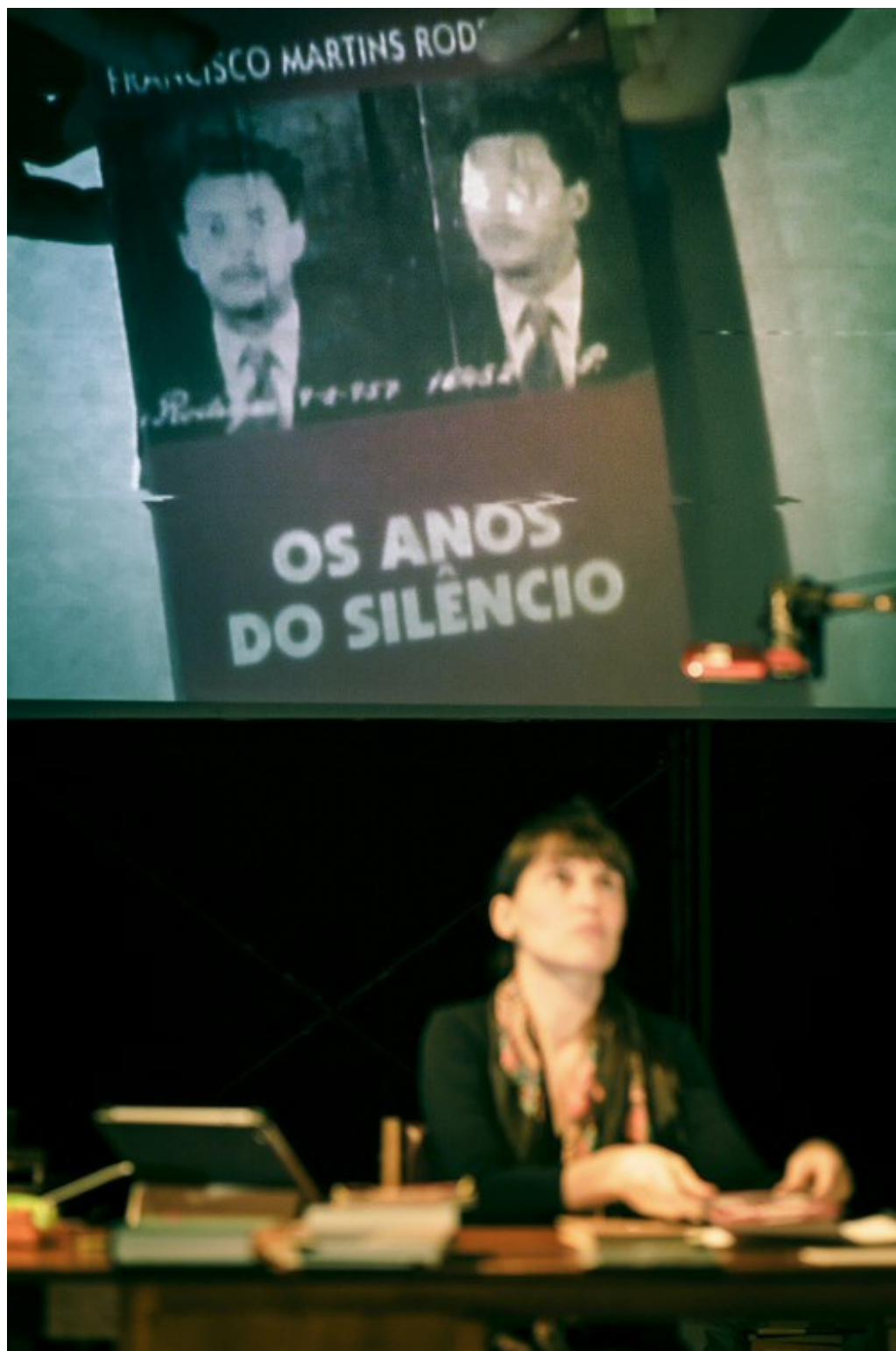
In the third lecture, entitled “Interrupted Portuguese,” Craveiro acts as a radio journalist, narrating the events of the night of April 24, 1974, when the revolutionary soldiers took over the national radio and used it to communicate between them and to coordinate their movements using well known songs as codes.

The fourth lecture is focused on the joyous celebrations of liberty and democracy achieved with the Carnation Revolution. Craveiro narrates her interviews, actually sharing with the audience how the interviews were made, and how they were experienced and commented upon by her interviewees, giving a strong, nostalgic atmosphere to the performance. The enthusiastic and communal years immediately after the revolution that we hear about in the interviews have become a distant memory; very few of the utopian desires of those glorious years were achieved. Intermingled with these recollections, Craveiro tells us how during one of her research journeys to a London library, she found a book about Portuguese revolution written by a British “revolutionary tourist” from the seventies thanking both her parents for the help they gave him at the time. This deploys, once again, a mixture of both public and private events.

The fifth lecture is about one of the most sensitive aspects of Portuguese recent history. During the decolonization process, thousand of Portuguese citizens left Africa (many in a hurry and leaving without any possessions). Thus, “Amazed to be back: The story of a family” deals with some of the social tensions, the cultural shock and the incidents that occurred in those years through the story of a particular family.

“When did the revolution end?” is the most politically engaged part of Craveiro’s production. The title of the sixth lecture brings the scope of the performance to our present days and to the theatre maker’s political anguishes and doubts. The leitmotif is a box of books that Craveiro’s father was supposed to donate to the 25th of April’s Documentation Centre in Coimbra, but that he managed to keep in his office for decades. Scrutinizing and reading several excerpts from these books, commenting on postcards, leaflets or book covers, Craveiro interrogates many of the political routes taken in the lives of our country, her parents and herself.

Finally, “Post-generation” is a lecture dedicated to the generation born after 1974 but that still keeps an emotional tie with its cultural, political and philosophical heritage. It is dedicated to my generation, to the failure of our hopes and utopias.



The Living Museum of Small, Forgotten and Unwanted Memories, by Joana Craveiro / Teatro do Vestido. Photo: João Tuna.

3. Embodied Knowledge

Craveiro lectures are, in effect, about Portuguese memories of left-wing resistance to the fascist dictatorship; the early years of democracy; the social tensions of the eighties; the affluence of the nineties; and about the precarious position of Portugal and, in particular, the Portuguese working-class, during the crisis of recent years. All these memories are very familiar to me, to the point that they could seem to be my own memories.

Craveiro was born in 1974. I was born in 1975. Politically and ideologically, although there are, inevitably, some small differences in our approaches, I think we are on the same side

of the “barricade.” Furthermore, we both maintain an intricate emotional tie with the cultural memory of the Carnation Revolution. So, departing from an intrinsically personal and familiar point of view, Craveiro has in fact created a “Museum of Lost Memories” for our whole generation, a generation that has seen the collapse of most of the dreams and utopias of the revolutionary years and that has been helpless in the face of the dangerous rise of savage, neo-liberal capitalism, or that has simply left the country. In any case, we are a generation that lives with an acute sense of failure.

As a critic, I have no objective distance whatsoever from this performance. I have no option other than being Baudelairean about it. I have no choice but to be partial, political and passionate about the work. As a critic, I feel a passionate urge to defend it, to discuss it, to analyze it as part of my generation’s resistance to historical oblivion.

The strength of my response to Craveiro’s piece signals what I consider to be an inherent aspect of criticism, namely that there is nothing objective in the act of critiquing a work of art. The brilliance, the joyous intelligence and the impressive pertinence of Craveiro’s production notwithstanding, my motivation for writing this paper is the manner in which the work affected my way of dealing with a theatre performance. I believe strongly that, for a theatre critic to truly perform his/her task, s/he must forget things such as impartiality or objectivity. As I see it, those are things that are completely impossible when analyzing and debating a live performance. Criticism inhabits the sphere of subjectivity, authorship, personal intuitions, passions and convictions.

Elin Diamond in her essay “The violence of ‘We’: Politicizing Identification” (written in 1991), argues that traditional reviews tend to ignore the multiplicity of responses to a performance by an audience. Assertions such as “we feel Macbeth’s fear” or “we understand Nora’s frustration” project the “subjective responses of the critic on to the rest of the audience,” as Helen Freshwater puts it (8). Thus, “[o]ne of the effects of such rhetoric [in which the emotions and thought of others are assumed to follow our model] is a fictitious but powerful sense of community that buttresses but also conceals the narcissistic claims of the critic” (Diamond 404). I have always tried to escape this fallacy. Therefore, I think that criticism should carry, as transparently as possible, the ideological, generational and personal signature of its author. Therefore, the body of the critic, in its synesthetic sense, is always determinant.

In order to redefine visceral performances, Josephine Machon has found a very useful concept: “(syn)aesthetics.” She creatively combines the notion of synaesthesia, defined as “the production of a sensation in one part of the body resulting from a stimulus applied to, or perceived by, another part [and] the production . . . of an associated mental image of a sense-impression of another kind,” and aesthetics, understood as the “subjective creation, experience and criticism of artistic practice” (13,14). Drawing heavily on the quintessential features of the neurological condition of synaesthesia, Machon connects the neurological and theatrical realms, arguing that:

the (syn)aesthetic-sense defines the intuitive human sense that makes sense/*sense* of the unrepresentable and the inarticulable. It is brought about in performance practice where dramatic techniques express ideas, thoughts, emotional experience, psychological states and so on, that are beyond the bounds of conventional communication. . . . It is this fusion of the ‘felt’ and the ‘understood’ in making sense/*sense* of intangible, inarticulable ideas that is crucial to (syn)aesthetics appreciation. (20, 21)

Thus, “the term (syn)aesthetics (with a playful use of parentheses) encompasses both a fused sensory perceptual experience and a fused and sensate approach to artistic practice and analysis” (14). In Machon’s perspective, this (syn)aesthetic comprehension of a performance leads to an “embodied knowledge” of it (21). The lesson of Artaud echoes loudly in Machon’s definition: “Whoever says feeling also says intuition, that is, direct knowledge, inverted communications enlightened from within. There is a mind in the flesh, but a mind quick as lightning. And yet the agitation of the flesh partakes of the mind’s higher matter” (qtd. in Machon 13). Thus, Machon’s argues that the “key aspects of (syn)aesthetic comprehension are the imagination, the ineffable and the fact that the work is experienced through the human body” (21). As she puts it, the (syn)aesthetic performance style asserts an “embodied knowledge due to the fusion of corporeal and cerebral perception.” Therefore:

This idea of the body as not only a primary signifier but also the principal human instrument that reads in a unique and innate way is of utmost importance to the (syn)aesthetic mode of appreciation. The palpable content of (syn)aesthetic work and the subsequent (syn)aesthetic interpretation is a direct result of such corporeal intervention. (24)

All this contributes to considering as fundamental for a (syn)aesthetics response “the notion that the body is the sentient conduit for the appreciation of artistic work in general, and performance in particular” (22).



The Living Museum of Small, Forgotten and Unwanted Memories, by Joana Craveiro / Teatro do Vestido. Photo: João Tuna.

Although Machon is thinking about what she calls “visceral performances,” the ones that operate deliberately on the senses of the spectator (most of the time, in extreme ways, such as radical performance art or “in-yer-face drama”), as I understand it, this notion can also be applied to less “extreme” performances. In effect, it is inherent to the nature of spectatorship to participate in the performance, using all the potentialities of our body and to respond to it in the most *emancipated* manner possible. Otherwise, one will not really “be” in the performance. One could be in the venue where the performance is taking place, but you simply wouldn’t be part of it. The critic’s body must not be blocked from the performance. I recall warmly Kenneth Tynan’s words in an interview with the editors of

Theatre Quarterly in 1970. Answering the question, “Do you have any regrets that you aren’t any longer yourself writing criticism?” he responded, “None at all. I did it for twelve years. . . . I think that’s long enough. After that you are recording not what is actually happening to your sensibility but what you think ought to be happening to it, or what once happened to it” (197). Tynan realized that his body was numb to what was happening on stage and decided to quit. His body had left the performance. It was time for him to join it.

Regarding Craveiro’s *The Living Museum*, what I could understand of the performance was overwhelmed by what I felt during it. Yet, I think that it is only through the fusion of “the felt” and “the understood” that this performance reaches its point. Its political dimension is beyond propagandistic strategies or more explicit communicational strategies.

Notwithstanding its cerebral dramaturgical structure, its strength comes from the sphere of the intangible and the inarticulable, much more than from the perceptible. It deals with memories, often conflicting, of a very intense period of recent Portuguese history, where many wounds were open and many remain unhealed.

To present a performance like this one in Portugal today is to facilitate Fisher-Lichte’s “autopoetic feedback loop,” especially for spectators born in the seventies. It serves us by projecting our own memories and family stories; in fact, this was acutely perceptible in the talks with the audience that followed every performance (this was actually part of its dramaturgical structure). Most of the interventions from the audience manifested the theatregoers’ need to continue the performance and to recall their own personal narratives or family stories, and to include them in the “Living Museum.” These reactions obliterated utterly the aesthetic response to the performance. The argumentative rhetoric of the production is not “beyond the bounds of conventional communication,” to use Machon’s expression (20). Its modes of expression are deductive, expository and argumentative. The performance clearly aims to be as rational and historically accurate as possible (Craveiro has clearly undertaken a great amount of research in creating this lecture-performance). Besides, its soundscape, its tonality, its atmospheres, its spatiality, is dominated by moderation, quietude and calmness—everything contributes to the creation of a good environment in which to talk, listen and comprehend. Nevertheless, its impact on me was neither entirely rational nor objective. But then again, as I have been arguing, a critical response to a performance never is.



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4. Concluding: The Restoration of the Public Sphere

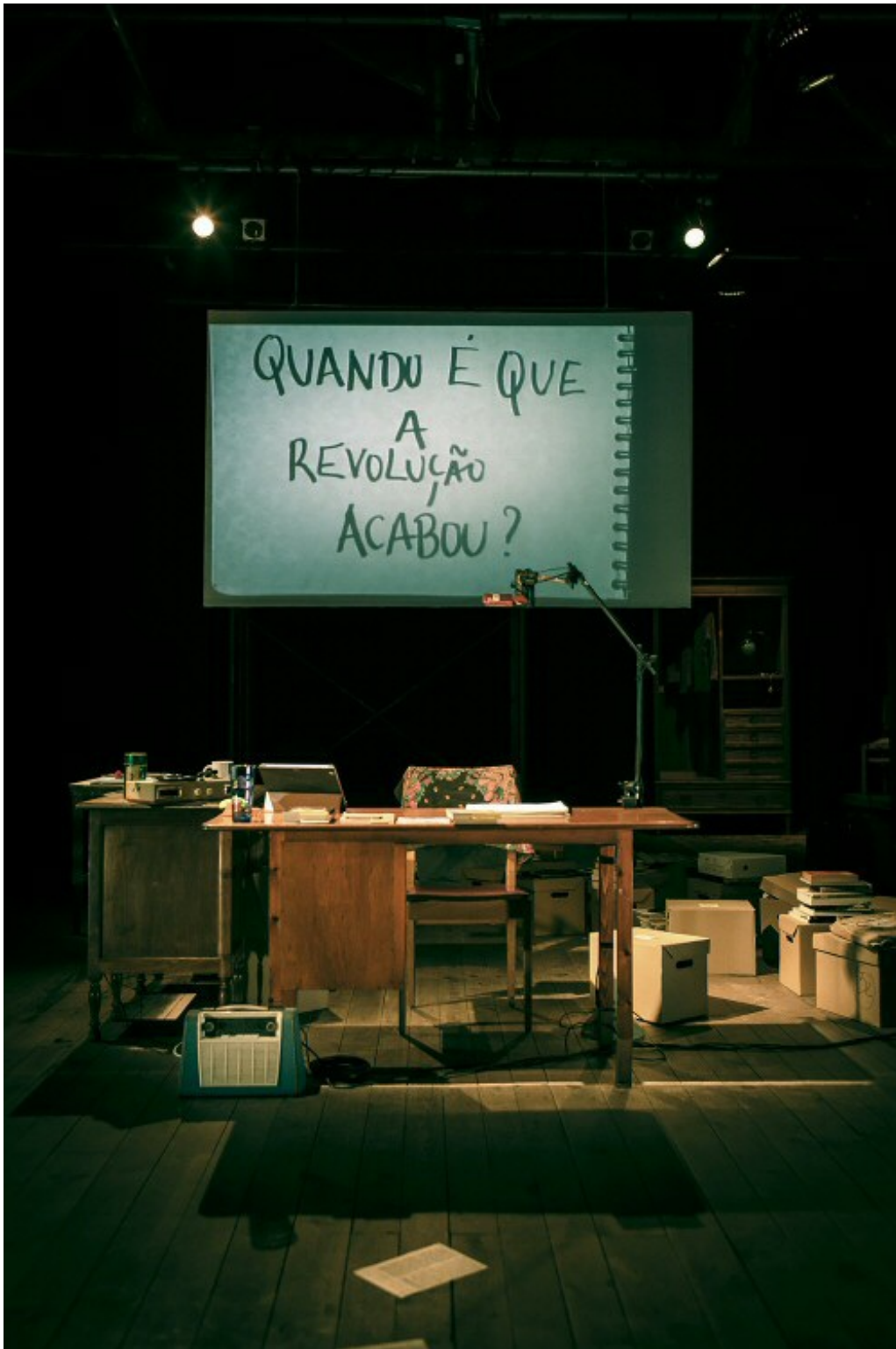
I cannot stress enough the importance of this performance. It fights against the oblivion of the horrors of the dictatorship and the desire in the current right-wing politics in Portugal to blank out some of its major accomplices and perpetrators. In recent years, politics and the public sphere in Portugal have been dominated by the fear of crisis and economic collapse. Our right-wing President and Prime Minister collaborated in a public discourse of revitalization of some “old times” figures and icons, as examples of moderated and accepted Portuguese traditions. In the public sphere, there was a practice of eluding to the past and manipulating history as a way to achieve a public oblivion.

The Living Museum of Small, Forgotten and Unwanted Memories fights directly against this attempt to infantilize the revolutionary years, its icons and utopias; therefore, it is fighting the oblivion of Portuguese twentieth-century history. In a way, it does for Portuguese history what Alain Badiou does for the twentieth-century—namely, it assures us that something unique, something that should be preserved and prolonged, took place. Thus, in line with Badiou’s lesson in *The Century* (which Slavoj Žižek summarizes as “remain faithful to the twentieth-century”), the lesson of Craveiro’s performance could be, “remain faithful to the Carnation Revolution.”

If one considers, as I do, that the savage growth of capitalism is linked completely with the disappearance of notions of criticism and the public sphere, one must assume that art and arts criticism have now a very important battle to fight (not for themselves but for all of us). It is a battle to resuscitate the concept of general will, of the public sphere, which is, as Jürgen Habermas has termed it: “a realm of our social life in which something approaching

public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body" (Habermas 1571).

Art and arts criticism are in the front line of the battle to overcome the oppression of the public sphere by the capitalist system. This battle won't be won easily or quickly, but it is absolutely necessary to engage in it. In order to fight this battle, criticism will decidedly need the presence of the critic's bodies with all their knowledge.



The Living Museum of Small, Forgotten and Unwanted Memories, by Joana Craveiro / Teatro do Vestido. Photo: João Tuna.

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